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ABSTRACT

Nine of the 12 principles for effective leadership programs suggested by R. Woyach and K. Cox (1997) were used in the creation of a teen leadership program in Fort Worth, Texas. With support from several sources, the Texas Agricultural Extension Service in Tarrant County created 4-H Youth for Community Action (4-HYCA), an after-school leadership development program targeting teens in three inner-city middle schools. The program provided opportunities for inner city youth to learn and practice leadership skills in a service-learning environment. The program used an experiential model to teach youth leadership skills. Program leaders met weekly with each group of students for 12 weeks. Participants were asked how they perceived their knowledge level prior to the program as part of a posttest. The use of experiential activities combined with service learning proved to be a successful model for teaching leadership skills to these students. The students also successfully carried out three significant community service programs in their neighborhoods. Students from two sites painted houses of elderly women, while students from the other school repaired an area of erosion in a park. The model used in the 4-HYCA program is one that can be implemented in any youth-serving organization. (Contains 12 references.) (SLD)

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Youth for Community Action: Leadership for Inner-city Youth

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Introduction

Leadership skills are essential for young people to feel satisfaction and contribute to society (Scheer, 1997). In today's large, inner-city schools, leadership positions are available to only a small number of students. Middle school students have even fewer opportunities than their high school counterparts. More opportunities for youth to learn and practice leadership skills are desperately needed.

Service learning projects are one method for increasing leadership opportunities. Service learning projects offer teens the opportunity to practice leadership skills and reflect on the experience to learn more about themselves. Skills such as brainstorming, decision-making, setting goals and working with others can be taught and practiced as teens plan and carry out significant service projects. Many studies support service learning as an effective method for teaching and enhancing leadership skills and positive attitudes in youth (Conrad and Hedin, 1983; Ladewig and Thomas, 1987; Yates and Youniss,1996).

Experiential learning takes place when a person is involved in an activity, looks back at it critically, determines what at was useful or important to remember, and uses this information to perform another activity. In the past few years, research in the area of experiential learning has strengthened this approach by adding several key processing steps beyond simply doing the activity or experience. These steps include:

- having the participants **experience** the activity--perform or do it;
- having the participants **share** the experience by describing what happened;
- asking participants to **process** the experience to identify common themes;
- having participants **generalize** from the experience to form principles or guidelines that can be used in real-life situations, e.g., life skills;
- asking participants to **apply** what was learned to another situation.

Providing an experience alone does not create "experiential learning." The learning comes from the thoughts and ideas created as a result of the experience. This is a "learn by doing" or experiential process. Addressing each step in the process assures a purposeful plan to obtain a specific goal (Bonn, 1999).

Woyach and Cox (1997) identified twelve principles that make effective leadership programs. The first five principles relate directly to the outcomes or content of leadership programs. The remaining seven principles speak to the process of leadership development. The twelve principles state that leadership programs should,

1. Help youth learn specific knowledge and skills related to leadership.

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2. Enable youth to understand the history, values and beliefs of their society.
3. Facilitate the development of individual strengths and leadership styles.
4. Facilitate the development of ethics, values and ethical reasoning.
5. Promote awareness, understanding, and tolerance of other people, cultures and societies.
6. Embody high expectations of, confidence in, and respect for the teens served.
7. Emphasize experiential learning and provide opportunities for genuine leadership.
8. Involve young people in service to others—to their community, their country and their world.
9. Facilitate self-reflection and processing of learning both individually and cooperatively.
10. Involve youth in collaborative experiences, teamwork and networking with peers.
11. Involve youth in significant relationships with mentors, positive role models, or other nurturing adults.
12. Be developed around stated purposes and goals.

Woyach and Cox state that few if any leadership programs can be expected to address all twelve principles, yet these principles represent an appropriate set of standards against which programs can be assessed.

4-H Youth for Community Action

Nine of Woyach and Cox's twelve principles for effective leadership programs were addressed in the creation of a teen leadership program in Fort Worth, Texas. With the support from a grant from the Texas Family and Youth Initiative, and in collaboration with the Fort Worth Independent School District and Communities in Schools program, the Texas Agricultural Extension Service in Tarrant County created 4-H Youth for Community Action (4-HYCA). 4-HYCA is an after-school, leadership development program targeting teens in three inner-city middle schools in Fort Worth. The participating schools were chosen for their location and predominantly minority student population. The purpose of the program was to provide opportunities for inner city youth to learn and practice leadership skills in a service-learning environment, emphasizing 4-H's learn by doing philosophy.

4-H Youth for Community Action used an experiential model to teach youth leadership skills. The three 4-HYCA groups were organized as an after-school program. Hobbs (1999) identified transportation as a barrier to participation in youth activities for many minority youth. While the after school setting eliminated this barrier, it created additional challenges. Participants had just completed a seven-hour day, spent largely sitting at a desk and listening to instruction. Their energy levels were high and their attention span at a minimum. A model that combined experiential education with service learning was chosen to engage the students.

County Extension 4-H Agents and volunteers met weekly with each group of students for twelve weeks. During each weekly session, participants were introduced to a leadership concept, such as decision-making models, and then provided the opportunity to practice that skill using experiential activities. The key to experiential learning is reflection about what was actually learned during the experiential activity and how that skill or knowledge can be applied to real-life situations. Upon completing the activity, such as the Spider Web (Rohnke, 1985), students were asked how they applied the decision-making model previously discussed. Did they brainstorm many possible solutions and discuss them before attempting to complete the activity? Following this period of reflection, the teens were asked to apply the new leadership skill as they planned their service activity. In the program, students learned to assess a community's needs, practiced decision-making and problem-solving skills, improving communication skills, setting goals, planning projects and team. Table 1 outlines the skills and experiential activities used in 4-HYCA.

Table 1. Experiential Activities for Teaching Leadership

Concept	Experiential Activity	Application
What is leadership? Getting acquainted	Ball Toss*	Team members work more effectively know each other well.
Working Together What are effective teams?	Chocolate River***	Must have an effective team to compl service project
Assessing Community Needs Why is community service important? How to look at your community What is brainstorming?	Brainstorming Fun	Brainstorming community service pro
Solving Problems 8 steps to problem solving	Solving Riddles	Discussion/brainstorming of how to s community problem
Making Decisions 8 Steps to Decision Making	Decision Trees**	Choosing our service project
Setting Goals Setting SMART Goals	Goal Mapping Activity - setting and mapping personal goals**	Setting and mapping community servi goals
Planning Projects Getting organized Delegating tasks	Spider Web*	Planning the service project What's needed, when, who will do it

* Silver Bullets: A Guide to Initiative Problems, Adventure Games and Trust Activities, Karl Rhonke

** Leadership: Building Skills for Life, 4-H Life Skills Curriculum, Purdue University Cooperative Extension

*** Cows Tails & Cobras: A Guide to Games, Initiatives, Ropes Courses & Adventure Curriculum, Karl Rhonke

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Participants were evaluated using the Leadership Life Skills Inventory (Carter, 1989) in a post- then pre-test design. Kohn and Rockwell (1989) suggest that when assessing self-reported behavior changes, the traditional pre-test, then post-test design may fail to demonstrate changes in behavior or knowledge. Participants in educational programs may have limited knowledge at the beginning of a program that prevents them from accurately assessing their baseline knowledge. Asking the post-test question first, then asking participants how they perceived their knowledge level prior to the instruction, eliminates this bias.

The use of experiential activities combined with service learning proved to be a successful model for teaching leadership skills to early teens. Students significantly increased their knowledge of leadership skills in the areas of decision-making, setting goals, working with others and community service.

The students also successfully carried out three significant community service projects in their neighborhoods. The Meacham Middle School students painted the houses of two elderly women who lived near their school. Students from Dagget Middle School repaired an area of erosion in the park near their school and placed new sod over the area to prevent future erosion. Forest Oaks Middle School received a facelift from its 4-HYCA participants who rejuvenated the landscaping at their school, earning the praise of teachers and parents.

Implications for Leadership Educators

Setting goals, solving problems and making wise decisions are not just skills for leaders, but are necessary skills for leading a successful life. Based on the findings of this study, the 4-H Youth for Community Action project had a positive impact on the participant's perceived level of leadership development. Combining experiential learning with the opportunity to put those skills into action is an effective method for teaching leadership skills. The key to experiential activities being more than mere games to the students lies in thoughtful reflection on the activity guided by adults trained in the process.

4-HYCA is a model that can be implemented by any youth serving organization. It is especially suited to early teens that lack the number of leadership development opportunities of their older counterparts.

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